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Music and Dance

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Like many cultural groups, Basque immigrant communities around the world have kept alive a vigorous performance tradition in which music and dance are markers of ethnic pride and identity. The importance of these art forms in the continuance of a distinct people is partly seen in the fact that Basque folkloric dance performances, like the Basque language, were outlawed for the first twenty-five years of the Franco government in Spain. Such dances were perceived by Franco as inflammatory of nationalist or separatist sentiments.

Just as the Basque language has been maintained primarily through oral transmission, so has traditional Basque music. Only in the 19th and 20th centuries have

written collections of Basque music been made. Clearly, the early music had spiritual power and marked major occasions in the lives of individuals and communities, but that tells us very little about either the nature or meaning of the music.

There are three ancient Basque musical instruments that give some sense of musical continuity in the American West and the Basque country, *Euskadi*. The first is the *Txistu*, a three holed end-blown pipe which is held and fingered by the left hand while the right hand keeps time on a small drum that is suspended from the bent elbow of the left arm. The second instrument is the *Alboka*, a double-tubed cane pipe. The *Alboka's* tubes are joined along their length, and each tube has a reed on one end. The reeds are enclosed in a cow horn, which serves as the mouthpiece of the instrument. *Alboka* players use circular breathing to produce a continuous sound somewhat like that of a bagpipe. The third instrument is the *Dultzaina*, a double-reed, wind instrument with an intense, penetrating sound. Two *Dultzainas* are usually played together accompanied by a third musician playing a drum.

While the *Txistu*, *Alboka* and *Dultzaina* are among the oldest Basque musical instruments, the instruments most associated with traditional Basque music and dance today—both in the Basque homeland and in emigrant communities—are the diatonic button accordion and the more recently developed piano accordion.

The button accordion was invented in 1825 and was probably in use in *Euskadi* by the mid-to-late 19th century. Although its introduction met with opposition—those who disliked the accordion called it *infernuko auspoa* (the Devil's bellows)—it quickly became the center of community music. It was loud, sturdy and capable of playing rapid complex melodies. It could also accompany itself with both chords and rhythm.

One of the forms of music that developed following the introduction of the button accordion was *Trikitixa*. The word is onomatopoeic for the push-pull breathing sound of the button accordion and came to mean both the instrument itself and the style of duet music made by a button accordion and a *Pandero* (tambourine). In *Trikitixa* music the *Pandero* is played with the fingertips so as to produce a glittering continuous percussive drive which mirrors the rapid melodic passages played on the accordion. *Trikitixa* is widely played today.

When Basque immigrants came to the western U.S., they brought the accordion, and eventually the instrument came to identify Basques both among themselves and among their non-Basque neighbors. The musical experience of the Basques of Buffalo, Wyoming is, in many ways, parallel to that of other small Basque towns in the American West.

In Buffalo—the Basque community has formed a club which has been the sponsor of the local dance troupe—the Big Horn Basque Dancers. The troupe is made up of children and young people from Basque families. For a few of the dances, the accompaniment is provided by the *Txistu*, but most dances are performed to the music of a single accordion. While the piano accordion, which was fully developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has largely supplanted the diatonic button accordion in Basque communities of the American West, the Buffalo group continues to use the older diatonic accordion.

The Big Horn Basque Dance group was formed at a time when people feared the loss of an identifiable Basque community. The purpose of the group is community maintenance, so its director and dancers devote great attention to replicating dances as

they would be performed in *Euskadi*. In order to achieve authenticity, some directors travel to Europe to see the dances performed. They also consult older dancers, view videotapes of prominent European and American dance troupes, and even reconstruct dances from oral or written descriptions.

Throughout the American West, Basque dance troupes perform many of the same songs and dances—"Hegi," "Zazpi Jauziak," "Bolant-Dantza," "Axuri Beltza," "Banako," "Diana Donostia," "Makil Haundia," "Baztan Dantza," and others. Troupes try to include dances from many, if not all, of the seven Basque provinces. The dances must identify the local Basque community without excluding regions of the original Basque homeland that may not be represented in the American group.

In the past, performances took place at Basque-only community events—at dinners or picnics, in celebration of Catholic holidays, especially the August 15th Feast of the Assumption of Mary, or as part of large family gatherings. In recent times there has been an increasing sense that the dances can and should be performed at non-Basque public events.

Basque dance can be divided into two parts—performance dancing and social dancing. The local troupe, after formal rehearsal sessions, will present dances to the community. After this performance, audience members will be invited to dance with the troupe one or more widely known dances from the performance repertoire. The last of these dances will be a *fandango*—the most popular social dance among the Basque people throughout the West. The *fandango* acts as a bridge between the purely performance dancing and the social dancing—polkas, waltzes, schottishches—that follows the performance.

Both the performance dances and the social *fandango* are intricate and precise. To the Basque people, these dances are more than motion, color and sound. In *Euskadi* and in the American West, music and dance are important markers of ethnic identity.

Perhaps in response to the Spanish experience of having the dances seen as politically dangerous, some American Basques have presented their dance troupes in purely aesthetic terms. There is a sort of cultural schizophrenia in doing so because the dance troupes have usually been formed in order to emphasize Basque identity. Still, the attempt to make the dances non-threatening to the broader community is understandable in light of Basque history in the United States.

The first Basques in the American West were often despised by some native-born Americans. The Basques were itinerant herders who entered the West at the end of the days of the open range. They were viewed as interlopers and their strange unknown language marked them as more foreign than foreign. Basques had to prove themselves "good Americans."

In the course of this century the image of the Basques has changed dramatically. They have gone from despised newcomer to romantic hero and hard worker. Outsiders frequent Basque restaurants and Basque festivals, taking away a new image of the hearty Basques who live for good food and wine, for sport and for dance. As William A. Douglass has stated, "American society is most tolerant of ethnic differences in the areas of cuisine and innocuous folk arts."

Aware of this and aware too of how recently they were reviled by some segments of American culture, many Basques have sought to present their dance as one such "innocuous folk art." One American dance troupe director has said that when he returned

from studying music and dance in *Euskadi*, some members of his community were reluctant to send their children to participate in his performance group. They feared that the director's commitment to the preservation of the regional dances was a mask for *ETA* sympathies. *ETA—Euskadi ta Askatasuna, Basque Land and Liberty*—is the militant wind of the Basque separatist movement.

Basque dance is shaped by the history of the Basque people, by their centuries of struggle for independence, and by their experience in isolated rural communities of the American West. In this social and historical context, the dance is more than artistic expression; it is a social and political statement of independence and unity.

In the Buffalo dance troupe's repertoire, there is one especially evocative dance—*"Zazpi Jauziak."* This dance is one of the first taught to children and normally only children perform the dance.

Zazpi Jauziak means "Seven Jumps"—a reference to the fact that there are seven Basque provinces and, while each is separate from the others with differences in language, history and customs, the seven make up one Basque nation.

The music and dance for "*Zazpi Jautziak*" are in three sections. The first and second sections each include a few of the basic steps that go into making many Basque dances. Significantly, the third section is simply one bar of music.

After the first playing of sections one and two, the young dancers leap as high as they can into the air while audience members shout out "*Bano!*" (One!) After the second playing of sections one and two, the one-bar-long third part is played twice. The dancers leap twice and the audience members shout out with the leaps, "*Bano! Biga!*" (One! Two!) This goes on seven times so that the last time through, the one-bar third part is played seven times, the dancers leap seven times and the audience members call out, "*Bano! Biga! Him! Lau! Bost! Sei! Zazpi!*" (One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven!) This marks the dance as complete.

"*Zazpi Jauziak*" offers not only musical completeness—the relaxed feel of parts one and two played again and again, followed by the tension of the increasing number of leaps—but also social completeness. Community members are aware of the social and historical meaning of the dance, of the presence, if only symbolically, of Basque unity, and of the hope of maintaining Basque identity into the future. Young dancers and older audience members are brought together and both share in a history that, through dance, remains alive.